

## **The Disciplinary Terrain of Pacific History: Origins, Issues and Views**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the 1950s, J. W. Davidson took up the Chair of Pacific History at the Australian National University and delivered his inaugural lecture in which he suggested that history writing in the Pacific could no longer be seen from metropolitan capitals and that the focus should shift to the islands. Despite Davidson's claim to have decolonised Pacific history, critics argued that he did not offer any new direction or vision. It is the contention of this paper that it is not just Davidson's island-oriented History, but history writing in the Pacific in general that has suffered from progressive antiquation. There has been little or no theorizing in terms of the direction Pacific History should move towards. The consequence of all this is that Pacific historiography has become a methodologically and stylistically conservative discipline. New Pacific history needs to learn from writers in other disciplines, in particular literary studies that have been rejuvenated through the infusion of theory, philosophy and the styles and methodologies offered by other disciplines. This would be a primary step in decolonising the discipline that has remained for too long in the quagmire of conformity.*

**KEYWORDS:** *History, Pacific, historiography, island-oriented history, literary studies*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1950, J. W. Davidson took up the newly established Chair in Pacific History at the Australian National University (ANU). Four years later, on 25 November 1954, he delivered his inaugural lecture in which he outlined his vision for a new Pacific historiography. In that lecture Davidson argued that Pacific History could no longer be written from the viewpoint of the metropolitan capitals of the colonial powers and scholars and historians of Pacific History had to shift the vantage point in their narratives to the Pacific Islands. This philosophy, which came to be known as ‘island-oriented’ history, generated tremendous interest amongst young historians writing about the Pacific, mainly for what they believed to be the novelty of the suggestion and became the guiding principle behind the writing and study of Pacific History from the 1950s onwards (MacDonald, 1996, p. 24). This single moment in Pacific historiography has become for many practitioners of the discipline of Pacific History something of a seminal moment, an occasion in which Pacific History was not only institutionalised as a discipline, worthy of being studied in its own right but one in which it broke out of the matrix of imperial history, which for so long had provided the guiding philosophy and methodology for the production of historical texts. For those who subscribed to this view, Davidson’s vision offered a new direction after the discipline had been stifled for generations by the narrow and limited orientation and methodology of imperial historians.

Brij Lal, in a remark to Doug Munro, suggested that Davidson’s island-oriented history had the power of a new theology - island-oriented history a new mantra and Davidson a modern day prophet (Munro, 1996, p. 47). Whatever the case, the aura of mysticism surrounding Davidson and his new programme certainly hung large over the discipline years after his death. But there were also many critics of Davidson, some suggesting that he did not go far enough in laying the foundation for a truly island-oriented history, others questioning whether what he proposed was in fact anything new or revolutionary. It must be emphasised that what Davidson offered was an alternative vision from which Pacific History could have found a new direction. If we examine the broad contours of Pacific History, we find three different streams or perspectives: the so-called imperial history; Davidson’s island-oriented History; and the brand of history not associated with Davidson and his acolytes and emerging from centres other than the ANU.

## IMPERIAL HISTORY

Pacific historians generally agree that the rubric imperial history appropriately describes the nature of the historical texts that were being written in/on the Pacific prior to the arrival of Davidson at the ANU (Howe, 2000, p. 63). The rubric, imperial history, is quite apt for the reason that the programme of imperial history was clearly aligned to the imperial processes that were underway in most parts of the world, including the Pacific from the mid-1800s, and the worldview of imperial historians echoed the worldview and ambitions of the policymakers and politicians in metropolitan capitals of the time. It is also significant to note that ‘History’ as a discipline emerged in the west at precisely the moment of the rise of modern colonialism. Hence, as Bill Ashcroft notes, History as conceived in the western imagination, is essentially a narrative of empire “in which the conclusion, the *telos*, is that which drives the story itself – the spread

of civilization to all humankind” (Ashcroft, 2001b p. 88). He adds, “In its radical othering and violent annexation of the non-European world” the European colonial powers “found in [History] a prominent, if not *the* prominent, instrument for the control of subject peoples” (2001b, p. 83). Michel Foucault explains this symbiotic relationship between discourse and power: “these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 33). This entente between power and discourse is clearly demonstrated in the historical discourses of the period during which the colonial processes were underway in the Pacific. Although these discourses were produced by a variety of individuals, from explorers to politicians and from settlers to missionaries, they shared many points of commonality including functioning to define and consolidate the relations of power between the coloniser and the colonised, holding unified perceptions on the position of Pacific Islanders vis-à-vis Europeans, advancing views on what constituted the proper methodology for the study of the historical past and on what the appropriate subject of Pacific History was.

So what according to the imperial historians was the proper subject for the study of History? The *raison d’être* of imperial history was clearly the description of the activities and ambitions of Europeans in the Pacific. Kerry Howe points out that the history of the Pacific islands, like the history of other colonized regions of the globe, “had consisted of a history of imperial agents – explorers, missionaries, administrators – in the islands” adding that “their activities were viewed from mission, commercial, and government headquarters in England, the United States, Germany, or France” (1988, p. xiii). Although the arena may have shifted from the metropolitan capitals to the islands, the focus was still the same – the description of the lives and ambitions of Europeans. Pacific Islanders were merely props on a stage and the islands a backdrop against which European protagonists acted out European History. The Pacific Islanders were appropriated into the scheme of things only to the extent that they fitted into the grand design and machinations of European empires. Howe points out that if Pacific Islanders did find space in the pages of imperial histories “it was in a range of crude stereotypes that reflected western assumptions rather than any indigenous actuality – from noble savages, to ignoble savages, to Romantic and dying savages” (2000, p. 63). That the idea of the impending extinction of the Pacific peoples was one of the strongest themes in imperial histories is no accident and clearly demonstrates the insidious ways in which discourse functions to uphold certain worldviews, which in turn functions to justify political action. According to Howe, such an idea found currency in the eighteenth century and was most fully expressed in the writings of the so-called ‘Fatal-Impact’ writers. But those who spoke of the demise of Pacific peoples did not do so as an expression of western benevolence but for more ominous reasons: the imperial discourse was meant to justify and validate the colonial project. The control of discursive spaces was a corollary to the control of geographical spaces.

It must also be noted that fiction about the Pacific in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries belongs to the same discursive tradition of the west which has sought to seize control of non-western peoples through representation and political action. Abdul JanMohamed argues that colonial fiction “forms ideology by articulating and justifying the position and aims of the colonialist” (Nicole, 2001, p. 6). Hence, in fiction as in History we see a similar project of

misrepresentation and attempts at discursive control, which is a corollary of political control. Albert Wendt describes this process of misrepresentation in his castigation of early European fiction about the South Pacific:

Much of this literature ranges from the hilariously romantic through the pseudo-scholarly to the infuriatingly racist; from the noble savage literary school through Margaret Mead and all her coming of ages, Somerset Maugham's puritan missionaries/drunks/ and saintly whores and James Michener's rascals and golden people, to the stereotyped childlike pagan who needs to be steered to the Light. The Oceania found in this literature is largely *papalagi* fiction, more revealing of *papalagi* fantasies and hang-ups, dreams and nightmares, prejudices and ways of viewing our crippled cosmos, than our actual islands (Subramani, 1985, p. 80).

In European fiction about the Pacific we find another favourite past-time of the west that Edward Said makes the topic of his seminal work on Postcolonial studies, *Orientalism* (1978) - demonising the Orient. Because of their common project of serving empire, it is imperative that in any study of discourse and power one must look at the images created by the west of the non-western world in both History and fiction because the two discourses work in collusion as part of the western project to render the non-western world marginal and deviant. Such a project was undertaken by Robert Nicole in his *The Word, the Pen, and the Pistol*, which is a study of the French imagining of Tahiti in discourse. History is not an innocent account of the past of European societies, and therefore must be seen in that Foucauldian sense as a hegemonic and repressive discourse working in collusion with the other power structures in society to promote a particular world-view. The potency of the discourse of History is two-fold: it lies, firstly, in the very way in which it is conceived in the western imagination and secondly, in the system of representation through which the discourse operates. History is able to translate ideological concepts into concrete images that fix the non-western world as the 'Other'.

Another *idée reçue* of imperial history was that the beginning of history in the Pacific was with the arrival of Europeans, which supposes that Pacific Islanders were living in a historical limbo prior to contact with the west. This idea in effect rendered pre-contact Pacific Islanders 'historyless'. History, in imperial discourses, also became the story of evolution, progress and of the march of those nations towards a higher stage. Primitive nations could not claim to be 'in' History and therefore the task of the west was to provide these nations with a history – its own history.<sup>1</sup> To demonstrate the potency of the discourse of History and how it has not only discursively represented the non-western world as a deviant but has also claimed for the west a legitimate existence,<sup>1</sup> one needs to consider the ideas of the nineteenth century English historians Thomas Babington Macaulay, J. R. Seeley, Bishop William Stubbs and Lord Dalberg Acton. History as conceived in the narratives of these historians is the story of progress, evolution and the spread of civilization by the developed west to the less developed and primitive parts of the world. Bill Ashcroft (2001b, p. 94), writes that "[this] teleological view of history which emphasized the constancy of progress is, not surprisingly, a strong feature of the school of British historians who wrote during the emergence and growth of Britain's empire," adding that "for the major British historians of the nineteenth century the writing of history was coterminous with an unshakeable conviction of imperial order" (2001b, p. 93).

## **'ISLAND-ORIENTED' HISTORY**

But the understanding that colonial rule in the Pacific in the mid-twentieth century would end sooner than later was becoming clearer as the push for and attainment of independence from colonial powers in parts of Africa and Asia began to have resonance in the Pacific, with local leaders pushing for more autonomy and even political independence. Academics in Australian and New Zealand institutions also saw, as a matter of political expediency, the need to make calls for independence for Pacific nations. Many westerners were actively involved in the islands politics, helping draft new constitutions and planning contingencies for the period after the end of colonial rule. One such individual was James Wightman Davidson, who was involved with the internal politics of Samoa. Hence when Davidson made a call for 'decolonising' Pacific History, he was, in fact, merely extending his political involvement in islands to academia – decolonizing History was simply part of the larger project of political independence, a requirement of the times and equally applicable to other parts of the world under colonial rule, namely India, Africa and the Caribbean (Gunson, 1992, p. 4). So how did Davidson propose Pacific History be 'decolonised'? According to Davidson enthusiasts, his programme laid out the principles for the investigation and textual reconstruction of History, which was markedly different from the approach of the imperial historians. This new island-oriented History had three basic requirements: Pacific History needed to be a study of culture contact and multi-cultural situations; practitioners had to engage in 'participant history'; sources other than archival had to be considered when writing the history of Pacific societies. Overall there was to be a realignment of the perspective of History from the metropolitan centres of power to the islands themselves – the so-called island-oriented history.

On the first issue – that Pacific History needed to be a study of culture contact – Davidson encouraged historians to study the different waves of Europeans (missionaries, traders, beachcombers and administrators) that visited upon the Pacific and the impact the different categories of Europeans had on the islanders. The study of these different groups of individuals and their influence on the islanders was meant to "'humanise' and 'socialise' Pacific history" (Leckie, 1983, p. 9). The other important aspect of the new island-oriented History was an emphasis on 'participant history'. Niel Gunson explained that Davidson believed "all practitioners of Pacific history should be participants either directly through occupation experience or by extension of the meaning of participation through fieldwork" (1992, p. 6). As an example, he described his own fieldwork, which Davidson prescribed for him, a six months stint in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands with the London Missionary Society missionaries. Gunson suggested a natural corollary to participant history was the encouragement given to the use of oral sources and oral traditions of the islanders by Pacific historians, derived from participatory observation (1992, pp. 6-7). The imperial historians, on the other hand, depended entirely on written and archival sources and looked upon oral sources with derision.

## **CRITICISMS OF DAVIDSON'S 'ISLAND-ORIENTED HISTORY'**

It must be reiterated that many practitioners of Pacific History agree that Davidson was a key figure in breaking Pacific History from the matrix of imperial history as well as providing a vision

for a new kind of history writing in the Pacific. The issues of contention have been whether he did enough to decolonise Pacific History, whether history writing under his guidance moved in a more progressive direction and whether what Davidson proposed was in fact anything new at all. One historian who argued that what Davidson proposed was nothing new or revolutionary was Francis West: "Any classical or medieval or pre-industrial historian had long known that the past he or she studied was an alien world, to be understood in its own terms not in those of its historians' own world" (1973, p. 116). Ian Campbell, on the other hand, was totally dismissive of Davidson's programme, calling it "a marketing ploy" meant to 'sell' the new sub-discipline.<sup>2</sup> There are two important criticisms of Davidson's new historiography that need to be considered, the first made by Jacqueline Leckie, who agreeing with the likes of West, stated that Davidson did not provide any new direction in the field of Pacific History and the second by David Routledge, who challenged the very foundation of Davidson's island-oriented History.

Whereas others commended Davidson for decolonising Pacific History, Routledge in his article, "Pacific History as seen from the Pacific Islands," suggested that Davidson's island-oriented History did not go far enough to break Pacific History from the matrix of imperial history. Making a call not for an island-oriented but an 'islander-oriented' Pacific History, he argued that as a result of the narrow framework within which Davidson set the discipline, islanders ceased to be protagonists in their own history. He said that the studies under the Davidson school of Pacific History centred on the outsiders "even if the arena of action was the Islands" (1985, p. 81). He went on to argue that Davidson himself stated that Pacific History had its more immediate origins in imperial history, which concerned itself with European expansion and that this naturally meant that Pacific History should focus on the activities of the different categories of Europeans. Routledge warned that "as long as there is the possibility for Pacific Islanders to read statements of purpose about Pacific history that appear to deny them what they consider to be their rightful place, there is also the possibility that they will reject as irrelevant to themselves the work of those who have made such statements" (1985, p. 82) and moreover, "Pacific history will centre on Pacific Islanders and this must be accepted as such, by definition" (1985, p. 86).

The other criticism of Davidson's island-oriented History, made by Jacqueline Leckie, has its origins in an article by Kerry Howe entitled "Pacific Islands History in the 1980s: New Directions or Monograph Myopia?" in which he spoke of a crisis within Pacific historiography, where Pacific historians had lost sight of the directions outlined by its principal founding father, J. W. Davidson (1979, pp. 81-90). Leckie, however, suggested that it was Davidson's programme for a new historiography that was the cause of the mindless and directionless history writing that proliferated from the 1950s onwards in the first place. She criticised both Davidson and Henry Evans Maude for failing to provide "anything approaching a critical evaluation of the patterns and possible directions in the field" (1983, p. 9). She argued that under the tutelage of Davidson and Maude, historians spent most of their energies on producing monographs that were too narrowly focussed, parochial in orientation and oblivious to the larger influences that shaped an island group's history. She pointed out that while texts such as Dorothy Shineberg's *They Came for Sandalwood* (1967), and Caroline Ralston's comparative study of beach communities, *Grass Huts and Warehouses: Pacific Beach Communities of the Nineteenth Century* (1977), offered new perspectives, the studies also "served to divorce Pacific history from significant



political processes outside the islands” (1983, p. 14). What Leckie proposed was the need to move towards more analysis and comparative work in the fashion of Peter Hempenstall’s study of resistance to German colonialism in the Pacific, *Pacific Islanders under German rule: a study in the meaning of colonial resistance* (1978). She also maintained that Davidson’s island-oriented history was not revolutionary, adding it was merely a shift in emphasis “from history written as part of European imperialism to one based in the seminar rooms of Canberra” (1983, p. 12). Leckie lamented that the directionless history was self-perpetuating because most aspiring regional scholars usually ended up in Canberra.

## THE ‘INSIDER/OUTSIDER’ DEBATE

It is imperative to turn now to one of the issues in Pacific historiography that has been at the heart of much contention and debate - the question of the ‘ownership’ of Pacific history. It is a fact that the writing of Pacific History, has almost exclusively, been carried out by Europeans – explorers, missionaries, administrators, anthropologists, and professional and amateur historians. Similarly, as Wendt points out, Europeans almost exclusively wrote fiction about the Pacific Islands.<sup>3</sup> However, unlike the writing of fiction by Pacific islanders that burgeoned in the region, especially after the setting up of institutions like the University of Papua New Guinea (1966) and the University of the South Pacific (1968), history writing continued to remain mainly a European undertaking. This fact caused some to speak of academic imperialism and make calls for more indigenous participation in the writing of their own history. Some westerners took it upon themselves to initiate some sort of beginning of indigenous history writing. An American missionary, Sheldon Dibble, at the Lahainaluna Mission Seminary in Hawaii, made one of the first attempts to undertake a project to write a history of ancient Hawaii with the involvement of his Hawaiian students, notably David Malo (Munro, 1994, p. 232). Another individual who championed the cause of indigenous participation in his or her own history is Ron Crocombe. During his time as Director of the Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS) at the USP, Crocombe “reacted to what he regarded as the demeaning spectacle of Pacific Islanders having ‘their’ history almost exclusively depicted by outsiders” (1994, p. 232). In order to counter the so-called ‘academic imperialism’ Crocombe encouraged islanders to write the histories of their islands facilitating this through the institutional structure of the IPS.

Then there are those like Doug Munro and Oskar Spate who took a more cautious approach. Munro made the important point that the real argument in the so-called insider/outsider debate was not intellectual but political. Adding to Hugh Laracy’s observation that the most strident cries of academic imperialism emanated from Hawaii and New Zealand, Munro said that this was not surprising “given indigenous minority groups with a keenly felt sense of past oppression, occupying a lowly niche on the socio-economic scale, but with increasing political clout and a determination to redress injustice through organised activity” (1994, p. 233). Oskar Spate in *The Pacific as an Artefact* (1978) explained, “As to why Europeans should write Islands or any other non-European history, the simple answer and a sufficient one (though far from the only one), is that of Herodotus and Terence: intellectual curiosity, or if you like just curiosity, and a common human feeling” (Spate, 1978, pp. 42-43). He added that island-born and trained historians needed to go beyond their region and tackle global topics. Ian Campbell also made

the important point that Pacific Islanders were caught in an intellectual ghetto because they were expected to write only Pacific islands history. He asked why this should be the case.<sup>4</sup> It is not the intention of this paper to get entangled in the ‘insider-outsider’ debate, which has been largely unconstructive to begin with, although the fact that locals are not engaged in the writing of their own history is problematic and one must wonder if Pacific History can truly be decolonised when so many of the historical discourses are being produced by non-Pacific Islanders. The real issue in Pacific historiography is what Hayden White calls “the progressive antiquation of the ‘art’ of historiography” (White, 1978a, p. 44). It is imperative to further critique Davidson’s island-oriented history with the intention of revealing this state of ‘antiquation’ or decay even in contemporary historical texts.

There are three main criticisms of the new historiography as envisioned by Davidson and promoted by his successors at the ANU and those sympathetic to his vision in institutions around the Pacific. The first is Davidson’s insistence that the field of Pacific History was merely a subset of the European discipline of History, and hence to be guided by the disciplinary codes and procedures of that discipline. This only perpetuated the discursive colonisation of the earlier generation of imperial historians and hence the claim made by Davidson’s disciples that he somehow ‘decolonised’ Pacific history needs to be challenged. The second criticism is of the nature of the history writing that flourished under the tutelage of Davidson and his progeny at the ANU and other institutions. This brand of history was both stylistically uninspired and intolerant of the polyphony of ways in which the past can be textually inscribed. The final criticism is the lack of self-reflexivity and theorising by historians working within Davidson’s framework that could lead to the revitalising of the discipline, offering new directions in the field. Let us consider the first criticism.

Davidson, in his inaugural address, made the contentious point that while Pacific History belonged to the field of study known as modern History, it had its more immediate origins in imperial history, which, he said, was concerned with the expansion of European empires – Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch and British. This meant that Pacific History was merely a subset of European History and hence the methods and procedures for studying and writing this history was to be provided by the European discipline of History. It also meant that the Pacific had no independent history. The protagonists in the island-oriented History, it is apparent, was to be Europeans. This argument is validated by David Routledge’s analysis of Davidson’s programme, which he saw as merely concerning itself with European expansion and focusing on the activities of the different categories of Europeans and hence denying Pacific islanders agency (Routledge, 1985, p. 81). Hence Davidson’s two ideas, firstly the proposal to break Pacific History out of the matrix of imperial history by making it island-centred, and secondly his insistence that Pacific History was a subset of European History and of the Western discipline of History, are contradictory and reveal the insidious ways in which culture specific ideas and notions operate and make themselves accepted or ‘official’ knowledge. Maude’s view that “Pacific history is not some esoteric discipline out on a limb of its own, with a distinctive theoretical basis, methodology and jargon, but merely a specialization of the mainstream” (1971, p. 3) is just as unpalatable as the one espoused by Davidson and is a kind of relativism. Such claim of universalism has the effect of privileging that particular cultural group and its systems of knowledge. We need seriously to



investigate the reasons behind this way of thinking. In order to truly decolonise Pacific history, it is necessary to radically change the programme of History itself. In such an undertaking, Pacific historians need to emulate the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, which Ranajit Guha suggests was “opposed to much of the prevailing academic practices in historiography ... for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 15).

## RE-IMAGINING HISTORY

Hence, Bill Ashcroft’s call for the transformation of History, like Hayden White’s appeal for reimagining History, takes on a greater urgency for postcolonial people as such a project would ultimately lead to the restoration of the postcolonial world from the margins of History to the centre. Reimagining History also means the reclaiming of a past and hence the reclaiming of a legitimate existence. It means the decolonising of hegemonic discourses, a project which Davidson proposed for Pacific History. But, as Ashcroft reminds us, the task of reimagining History is not simple, for postcolonial people have so often “failed to gain access to the very institution of ‘History’ itself with its powerful rules of inclusion and exclusion” (Ashcroft, 2001b, p. 92). Ashcroft writes, “How history might be ‘re-written’, how it might be interpolated, is a crucial question for the self-representation of colonized peoples. Ultimately, the transformation of history stands as one of the most strategic and powerfully effective modes of cultural resistance” (2001b, pp. 14-15).

As part of the transformation of History, one would need to examine the style of history writing that has flourished in the Pacific since Davidson voiced his proposal. Historical texts that have been produced under the island-oriented History have been stylistically sterile and practitioners overly concerned with the verification of details from the past. This is not to say that history should sacrifice veracity for style. However, historians writing history as part of the new historiography need not be overly concerned with the scientific verification of facts at the cost of other variables like form, style, theory, philosophy, self-reflexivity, experimentation, innovation and imaginative reconstruction using sources that include Pacific epistemologies. Historians need to keep in mind the idea proposed by Hayden White, who resisting a positivist view of History, suggested that the historical text was a literary artefact (Domanska, 1988, p. 174). Writing in the 1980s, White lamented that the discipline of history was in a state of crisis because historians “concerned to salvage history’s claim to scientific status” had eschewed the interpretive element in history and lost sight of the discipline’s origins in the literary imagination (1978c, p. 51). White proposed a structuralist reading of history as ‘constructivist’/‘interpretive’, and hence closer to the arts than the sciences. It is an idea that was influenced by the tropes used by R. G. Collingwood, Northrop Frye and Claude Lévi-Strauss - ‘constructive imagination’, ‘*mythos*’ and ‘fraudulent outlines’ respectively – to locate history in the realm of myth or fantasy.

The final criticism of Pacific History, which is the lack of self-reflexivity and theorising possible directions the field could move towards, has been made by other scholars, most notably Kerry Howe and Jacqueline Leckie. The criticisms levelled by the two at Davidson’s new historiography reveal the larger concerns about the kind of historiography that has flourished in the Pacific under the tutelage of Davidson and those that came after him. A history that is self-reflective

gives it the power of prescience and is more useful to humanity than history that simply dredges out facts on narrow topics. An inspired history must not only present facts; the author must also muse on the procedures for collecting these facts, the process that went into writing that particular text, and the implications the findings have for humankind in general; in this exercise it ought to move in the direction of philosophical reflection and observation. In order to achieve this objective, historians must consciously and continuously probe and reflect on the process of history-writing itself, asking questions such as why we must reclaim the past, how best the past can be investigated and in what shape and form the past should be recreated. Naturally historians have to spend a little more time theorising on the art of history writing. There is a view put forward by Pacific historians that theory must emerge from within a piece of work or that any historical text must contain a simple linear narrative, that is, simply tell a story, devoid of any theoretical underpinning or analysis. Davidson's narrow-minded dislike for the discourses of the Structuralists and Marxists and the fact that he had little time for the new theories of the 1950s "unless the proponents had reached them by experience" is a kind of parochialism that would be best left out of the pursuit of learning (Lal, 1992, p. 4). White spoke of a similar loss of moral coloration in the discipline of history from the mid-nineteenth century, which had been one of the causes of the general revolt against the discipline. The discipline of history, White argued needed to "establish the value of the study of the past, not as an end in itself but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of the problems peculiar to our time" (1978b, p. 41). He concludes that "anyone who studies the past as an end in itself must appear to be either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present" or a 'cultural necrophile' "who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living" (1978b, p. 41). In "Hayden White: Beyond Irony", Ewa Domanska suggests that White is "one of those thinkers who see historical knowledge as a problem of consciousness, and not merely as one of methodology" (Domanska, 1988, p. 176). She adds that like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville, "White is conscious that the way one thinks about the past has serious implications about the way one thinks about one's own present and future" (1988, p. 176). White laments that many historians do not ask themselves the question of why they study the past, explaining that he was fascinated by Collingwood and Croce because they raise questions of why we study history; he was inspired by the great reflective historians like Huizinga because they not only studied the past but also reflected on how the past was to be studied. Fortunately for Pacific historiography certain historians, writers of fiction and literary critics such as Albert Wendt, Epeli Hau'ofa, Klaus Neumann, Greg Dening, and Robert Nicole, have brought in fresh vigour in thinking about Pacific history, which could rescue it from the malaise of conformity and mediocrity it has been stuck in for far too long.

So what Davidson offered was simply a change in orientation but nothing revolutionary in terms of defining a new style of history writing. Routledge in *Matanitu* (1985), though well-intentioned did not, as pointed out by Morgan Tuimaleali'ifano<sup>5</sup> write an 'islander-oriented' history himself, nor did he say how that new history would free it from the institutional shackles of 'History'. What Routledge and others of similar intellectual tradition have said is important, but constitutes only a partial remedy for bringing about a kind of writing that goes far beyond orthodoxies of conventional history. What none of those who have attempted theory have spoken forcefully of is how history can be made more vibrant and exciting for its readers and from where exactly the

programme for this new history would come. It is the argument of this paper that one of the areas the programme to re-imagine and re-conceptualise Pacific History will come from is literary studies in general and Postcolonial literature in particular. This task is important to establish the fact that what is being proposed is not being done in isolation or without precedence, but has been proposed by others who share an enthusiasm for a new kind of history-writing, one that is all-accommodating and not at all stifled by artificial disciplinary boundaries. There are those who will be content just to work within set frameworks and conventions without giving a thought about whether those programmes are taking the discipline in any new direction. Fortunately, there are those who are constantly seeking new ways to push the limits of the discipline they are working within. One of these is the Pacific historian Robert Nicole, who was trained in the discipline of literature and whose text *The Word, the Pen and the Pistol* was path breaking for a number of reasons.

### **DISTURBING 'HISTORY'**

*The Word, the Pen and the Pistol* is a study of contesting narratives: western narratives of the non-western world in general, and French narratives of Tahiti in particular, that sought to create representations of Others that eventually ascended to the position of 'regimes of truth' (2001, p. 3). Nicole, using Edward Said's theory of 'Orientalism', "demonstrate(s) the role played by French literature and other discourses in the construction, articulation, dissemination and subsequent marginalisation of Tahitians as racial and sexual 'Others'" (in Abstract). The significance of Nicole's text lies in his ability to put the marginalisation of the Tahitians or Maohi into a broader historical framework by tracing the lineage of this western tradition of discursive misrepresentation of the non-western world all the way back to antiquity. The text is distinguished by a concern with both literary and historical analysis and framed by the thought of several cultural theorists namely Edward Said, Aijaz Ahmad, Louis Althusser, Robert Miles, Linda Alcoff, Abdul JanMohamed, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. Nicole puts the theoretical ideas of Said and Foucault in a historical perspective by demonstrating, from the example of the French in Tahiti, that discursive colonisation is often a prelude to, or goes hand in hand with the actual colonisation of a geographical space because of the symbiotic association of knowledge and power. The text is significant in that it places at the centre of the narrative, the position of the subaltern as well as women. As noted, the main thrust of Nicole's work is derived from the Palestinian-American academic Edward Said, who in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), argues that Western colonisation of the non-Western world went hand in hand with the Western tradition of 'Orientalism': the marginalisation, misrepresentation and demonization of the non-western world in Western narratives. Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), demonstrates the important role narratives play in the imperial quest by highlighting the great and unparalleled tradition of novel-writing in England and France, the two great colonial powers of the nineteenth century (1993, p. xxv). He points out that "A great deal of recent criticism has been concentrated on narrative fiction, yet very little attention has been paid to its position in the history and world of empire" (1993, p. xiii). Nicole suggests that *Orientalism* "marked a radical shift from conventional Western thinking by allowing the articulation of third world views, by attaching to the literary the same importance as the more favoured economic, institutional, political and scientific analysis and by offering a 'language' which allowed one to

identify discursive networks in many other culturally ‘marked’ areas of what is now called the third or fourth world including the Pacific” (1993, p. 18). In *the Word, the Pen and the Pistol*, Nicole demonstrates this potency of the French discursive tradition, which aided the French colonisation of Tahiti. He begins by putting the French project into the grand scheme of the west’s historical tradition for creating narratives and discourses to establish hierarchies of cultures. In an analysis of the canonical literary texts from Western Literature such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Aeschylus’s *The Persians*, he establishes a tradition of western paternalistic texts that created representations of non-westerners as inferior beings, which in turn provided the justification for colonisation. Nicole also demonstrates that it was in literary texts, starting with those produced during the period of Antiquity, that a clear demarcation between the west and the non-western world was established. He shows that these literary narratives became part of an archive or encyclopaedia of knowledge that had the strength of ideology or dogma and were used by the West to justify their exploitation of the non-Western world. It ought to be mentioned that Nicole’s text shows some of the same merits found in *Orientalism*: like *Orientalism*, it seeks to construct some sort of theoretical framework to examine the nature, relationship and mechanics of relationship and power while drawing from the historical past the evidence for such an enterprise.

Nicole, in his analysis of discourse and power and how French narratives and discourses aided the marginalisation and exploitation of Tahitians, links the historical process of colonialism to the power relations that exist between other subaltern and marginalised categories and ‘the master’ and dominant groups. Pacific History is embedded in a tradition that looks towards any extraneous theoretical framing as suspect. When one is dealing with oppressive structures like colonialism and patriarchy, one needs to engage in a more meaningful probe into the historical material and establish connections with other elements like discourse and power. Failing to do so could make it appear that the historian is shirking his moral responsibility to bring to light the moral ills at the heart of institutions such as colonialism and patriarchy. Ketu Katrak speaks of a social responsibility for writers and theorists in bringing to the fore the many important issues faced by postcolonial societies (Ashcroft et al, 1995, p. 225). Nicole’s study of Said’s theory of Orientalism allows him to understand that the same insidious process of Orientalism, which Said mentions was at work in the Middle East and other ‘culturally marked spaces’, was present in the Pacific during the colonial era. Nicole’s critique and indictment of colonialism stands in stark contrast to the absence of it in historians like Ian Campbell.

Nicole also contests the view that oral sources are not credible for rigorous history. He suggests that some Pacific historians have paid scant regard to orature or even dismissed its artistic value, which he says amounts to ‘technological colonialism’ (1993, pp. 174-175). He expresses disappointment with the fact that “in its binary relationship with writing ... orature has been expressed as a lack or deficiency” (1993, p. 174) He argues “In restoring centrality and agency to the Maohi imagination, ‘literature’ must be liberated from the confines of the printed page” (1993, p. 175). This statement is significant because it opposes one of the central tenets of the methodology of History, which is that any historical event not etched in writing must be suspect and therefore not worthy of being used in the reconstruction of the past. Conventional historians like Campbell uphold such a view. As mentioned previously, Nicole uses the terms ‘literature’

and the 'text' in the Derridean sense to mean "writing, orature, and all other social utterances". He calls this the 'democratization of literature' (1993, p. 175). There are several significant facts here worth pondering: firstly, Nicole acknowledges the existence of counter-narratives in Pacific societies and the indigenous people as always active respondents in the battle to control representation; secondly, he understands the fact that counter-narratives do not have to be written to have potency or legitimacy. In relation to Tahiti, Nicole talks about the subversive nature of oral narratives which many young Tahitians have used/are using to articulate their dissatisfaction not only with French administrators but also indigenous elites who have embraced the ideals of French culture for political mileage.

Significant though the acknowledgement given to indigenous counter-narratives may be, it is overshadowed by another significant moment in Pacific historiography: a discursive space provided for the indigenous female. A discussion of the position of the female in relation to the colonizer and indigenous patriarchal structure is vital because as Ashcroft et al point out the female "share(s) with the colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression" (1995, p. 249). Unfortunately the conventional historians of the Pacific forgo such a discussion in favour of a discussion of the actions of the colonizer (a White male) with a token discussion of the male elite in indigenous societies. If a central tenet of post-colonial texts, or those texts guided by the theoretical principles of post-colonialism, is the reinstatement of the voices of the marginalised and the oppressed, then Nicole fulfils that disciplinary requirement by bringing the voices of the Vahine or Tahitian female from the margins of discourse to the centre. Under the subtitle of 'The Vahine Replies', Nicole discusses the occasions for expression by the female, pointing out that most of the creative production since the 1980s in Tahiti has been by the indigenous female. Finally, Nicole engages in a self-reflexive enquiry by asking important questions such as whether he as a non-Maohi is in any position to write about the Maohi or to speak on their behalf and "if all histories are interest-laden constructions what are the possibilities of writing a new and creditable history of French colonialism in Tahiti?" and "can a new historiography that uses Western historical records and shares aspects of its methodology, claim to know and understand yet respect the Maohi people?" (1993, p. 2).

## CONCLUSION

Nicole, by posing these questions, shows the realization that using the methodology, systems of understanding and archival record of a discipline that emerged from a specific cultural tradition, to understand, mark, represent and make commentary on and about another cultural group is problematic. He admits, "... to speak for Maohi is a perilous exercise that often erodes and undermines their power to define themselves and their position in history" (1993, p. 167). Every historian needs to engage in a discussion of these important ethical questions; moreover this engagement should not be done separately but within the narrative of the historical text, thus intertwining history with a philosophy of history. Unfortunately most Pacific historians live and work stubbornly within the confines of their own disciplinary space. To foray beyond would in some way mean a violation of the spirit and principles of a discipline, which has been set in stone by people like Davidson and Maude. But Nicole and others like him have shown that

to tackle old historical problems with new approaches and styles is the way Pacific History needs to proceed in order to get out of the quagmire of conformity and find a ranking in world historiography. As pointed out earlier, White had demonstrated how in the nineteenth century the discipline of history, in an attempt to render the past objectively, in a single narrative which could represent things ‘as they were’, sacrificed *rhetoric*, that is, the awareness that the historical past can be textualized in a variety of ways. Thus the present study has arrived at the conclusion that by re-imagining ‘History’, Pacific peoples will assume control of the process of representation and truly begin the process of discursive decolonisation. There is urgency to this project of re-imagining history for the Pacific History because it has been stuck for too long in the quagmire of conformity. The methodological ambiguity of history offers opportunities for creative comment on past and present that no other discipline enjoys (White, 1978a, p. 48).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The postcolonial theorist, Bill Ashcroft, argues that “history and legitimation go hand and hand, history legitimates ‘us’ and not others” (1995, p. 335). The subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, in “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”, argues, “There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’” (1995, 1).
- <sup>2</sup> Statement made in a personal communication with author, 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> Cited in Subramani, South Pacific Literature: from Myth to Fabulation (1985, p. 80).
- <sup>4</sup> Statement made in a personal communication with author, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> Morgan Tuimaleali’ifano, “Where are Indigenous Pacific Island Historians?: Oral Versus Written Histories.” Unpublished Seminar Paper. 4-6.



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